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HEADLINE: From North Korea: Faint Rays of Light

BODY:

Is it possible to imagine a North Korea whose leaders admit their economic difficulties, acknowledge South Korea's successes and disavow the dream of reuniting the peninsula under their strange brand of Communism? That's the remarkable portrait painted by Selig Harrison, an American writer, in The New York Times last Sunday, after a recent stay in Pyongyang.

Kim Il Sung, North Korea's 75-year-old leader, is nothing if not unpredictable, and there is little to go on so far but words. Still, this impoverished militaristic nation, whose Soviet and Chinese allies court economic change, might just be seeing some light. South Koreans and Americans have nothing to lose and much to gain by tending the tentative shoots with care and receptiveness.

The very fact that a Western writer could get such access and apparent candor from North Korean officials is something. When it comes to secretiveness, only the likes of Albania and Afghanistan have rivaled North Korea. Mr. Kim, one of the world's longest-ruling leaders, also cultivates perhaps the most excessive personality cult.

Vaunted as the man who can turn sand into rice and branches into bombs, he is trying to create the world's first Communist dynasty by making a leader out of his son, Kim Jong Il. Support for the son seems at best lukewarm, however, and the economy spirals down. In the three decades since the Korean War, the South has gone from primitive agriculture to a thriving high-tech economy and now turns to developing its political system. Yet in the North, military expenditures devour a quarter of the gross national product. If Mr. Harrison's impressions are correct, the leadership sees the inevitability of redirecting some of those resources.

Pyongyang's talk of force reductions in conjunction with a withdrawal of American troops from the South is not new; what is new are the hints to Mr. Harrison about how and when to achieve this. Similarly, there has been talk for years of peaceful federation rather than reunification by force. But Pyongyang now speaks of a gradual, step-by-step approach and allowance for separate political institutions and armies. For all this rhetorical sweet reason, the West still waits for actions. Pyongyang could prove its new practicality by reducing tension along the demilitarized zone.

At the same time, while Washington and Seoul need to respond with skepticism, so they need to be attentive. It makes sense that Pyongyang, pressured by Moscow to address its economic problems and facing a leadership succession, would want to reduce hostilities and use scarce resources more productively. It doesn't make sense to assume the status quo in the North. It's time to encourage, and

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test, those in Pyongyang who really do want change.

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